

Yvette Hutchison. *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*

Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2013

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3691>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.3691

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2015

Number of pages: 206-208

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Francesca Mussi, "Yvette Hutchison. *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 121 | 2015, Online since 01 October 2016, connection on 05 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3691> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.3691>

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Yvette Hutchison, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2013, 256 p.

- 1 “Memory is a weapon. Only a long rain will clean away these tears” (1) is the epigraph of the introduction of Yvette Hutchison’s book, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*, an insightful contribution to the understanding of memory and the process of negotiating it in contemporary South Africa. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in fact highlights the importance of the past and the process of remembering it in a country like South Africa: “The past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye we will find that it returns to hold us hostage.” (Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, London: Random House, 2000, 31)
- 2 Since the first democratic elections in 1994 South Africa has been engaged with creating a single coherent national narrative of the “rainbow nation”, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) played a fundamental role in this process of negotiating memory and national identity. However, Hutchison emphasizes the instability and mutability of the phenomenon of memory, “a lens through which we view experience, and one that may be distorted” (3) for instance by time or the context in which the event is being reconstructed.
- 3 Carrying on the work initiated by Catherine Cole in *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), Hutchison thoroughly explores the relationship between memory and performance, arguing that

the latter “has been central to these processes of negotiating memory in a number of ways: insofar as public events have been used to foreground particular memories and histories, how theatrical productions have supported or challenged these performances of memory, and how a performance lens can further nuance particular formulations of memory” (2).

- 4 After lucidly outlining the aim of her study and the structure of the volume in the introduction – alongside clarifying some key terms such as “memory”, “nostalgia”, and “performance” – Hutchison starts her analysis of historical and cultural encoding by first focusing on a linguistic dimension of the process, both oral and written, then moving on to a more spatial level by discussing public events, exhibitions and memorial sites.
- 5 The first two chapters are dedicated to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how its work has been dramatized by theatrical practitioners. Besides being a public event, Hutchison defines the TRC as a “national theatrical event” (26) whose main goals were to foster reconciliation, and use “individual stories to create specific coherent narratives about the past and thus to facilitate the growth of a coherent future nation” (*Ibid.*). After carefully describing the selecting and interpreting process of oral testimonies for public hearings – which formed a significant part of both the TRC archive and the TRC *Final Report* –, the author discusses the two central constituents of this live theatrical event – the “actors”, namely the commissioners, the translators, the witnesses, and the “audience”. She also places a particular emphasis on the “gap between the embodied repertoire and emergent archive of this public formulation of collective memory” (34). On one hand, Hutchison acknowledges that the broad narratives created by the TRC have become the generally accepted view of South Africa’s past; on the other hand, she observes that some aspects of the testimonies and hearings were not included in the archives – hearings’ transcripts or reports – such as the cries, sighs, gestures, silences, and other non-verbal expressions, assessing that “language and memory are particularly challenged in the context of pain and horror” (32).
- 6 The second chapter concentrates on some theatrical explorations and adaptations of the material from the TRC public hearings. I find this chapter particularly convincing because Hutchison’s argument about the primary role of performance in negotiating memory is strongly supported by in-depth analyses of both overt performative plays – *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, *The Story I am About to Tell*, *Rewind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape & Testimony*, and *Truth in Translation* project – and more traditionally text-based plays – *The Dead Wait*, *Nothing but the Truth*, and *Green Man Fleshing*. Aligning with Derrida’s reflection that no archive is decisive and that we should keep engaging with it (38), the author argues that while these plays, in addressing the weaknesses of the TRC, reveal “fault lines rather than offering solutions” (90), they also encourage this ongoing engagement especially with those “particular issues and memories [that] continue to haunt South Africa” (*Ibid.*).
- 7 Momentarily leaving aside this linguistic and narrative dimension of the negotiation with South Africa’s past, the following two chapters address other forms of remembering and staging the past. In the third chapter, Hutchison looks at more visual and spatial archives of memory such as the 1910 South Africa Pageant of Union, the 1938 Voortrekker Festival and the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in 1949, and, finally, the Freedom Park which opened in 2007. By focusing on how South Africa

narrated and performed itself at different moments of political crisis or transition – from the declaration of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the Afrikaner struggle for independence and nationhood, to post-apartheid era– Hutchison pointedly reinforces her argument about the importance of performance in remembering the past (here in the form of festivals, memorial sites or commemorations). However, bearing in mind that memory is not a fixed phenomenon, she further argues for the necessity of spaces included in memorial sites where visitors can meet, and share experiences and narratives in order to keep memory “flexible and open to interpretation and translation” (132).

- 8 This process of negotiating memory through spatial and cultural performances also continues during Thabo Mbeki’s mandates as President of South Africa. Following a slightly different direction from the TRC’s approach to South Africa’s past, Mbeki worked “to redefine South Africa in terms that countered negative colonial and apartheid formulations of black South Africans, while offering South Africa a sense of a ‘past glory’ and reconnecting the country with the African continent” (137). In the fourth chapter Hutchison extensively discusses the *Timbuktu Script and Scholarship* exhibition that toured South Africa between August and December 2008 as part of the African Renaissance project, which embodied “Mbeki’s desire to shift South Africa from focusing on its internal issues of struggle and reconciliation to reconnecting with a pan-African vision” (*Ibid.*).
- 9 Compared to theatrical performances, however, the TRC and these last examples of public spatial archives of memory seem to have some limitations in engaging “the public at large with the complexities involved in negotiating diversity and all its associated challenges” (160). As a result, Hutchison points out that the archives that have emerged from the work of the TRC and the African Renaissance project are not “perceived reality for all South Africans” (201). It is then no coincidence that the author decides to dedicate her last chapter on theatrical engagements with history and memory, supporting the role of theatre as a facilitator to open up the dialogue on the past, and to explore “innovative ways of engaging with diverse, complex and at times unspeakable stories” (202). A particular emphasis is posed on those plays which experiment with performativity and non-realistic forms – for example, Handspring Puppet Company and Brett Bailey’s plays, among others – suggesting that (artistic/theatrical) performance contributes to “[keeping] archives and repertoires open for reinvestigation and reinterpretation, in dialogue, and so continue to be ‘campaigners for invisible values no human being can live without’” (*Ibid.*)
- 10 Drawing on many scholars and combining different disciplines, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory* constitutes an original and compelling contribution to the field of performance and performativity, and its role in negotiating and staging South Africa’s complex past. I find the chapter on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission particularly convincing, because the author engages with the less explored relationship between memory, performance and the act of witnessing, rather than focusing on the widely discussed issue of reconciliation versus justice. Furthermore, Hutchison strongly supports her argument throughout the volume by providing exhaustive analyses of linguistic and spatially performed archives. The author succeeds in expressing her ideas with a clear and lucid voice, accompanying the reader throughout all the steps of her argument. For these reasons, I would recommend

this book to students and scholars willing to deepen their knowledge of South Africa's performative attempts to deal with and negotiate its memory of the past.

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